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Digital Constructions of Millennial Womanhood

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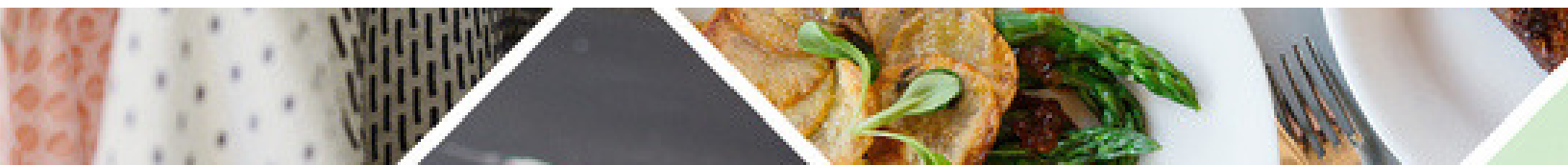


AMAZINGLY POWERFUL CREATURES

**DIGITAL CONSTRUCTIONS
OF MILLENNIAL
WOMANHOOD**

BY KELLY ARNOLD

IMAGE FROM REFINERY 29



SNAPSHOT

"We give up our bodies to create our children, our bodies change and gain perfect imperfections that we should be celebrating not shaming.
Women are amazingly powerful creatures."



What kind of language does Refinery29 use when discussing motherhood and working women?



Qualitative textual analysis + Voyant Tools
n= 45



- Use of social media to share mothering stories
- Celebrity as role model
- Earning power



Our results imply that postfeminist understandings of womanhood dominate. This dominance is achieved through an emphasis on individual capacities, lack of attention to structural barriers, and presenting all choices as equally empower while still reiterating that motherhood is the ideal.

PURPOSE

The power of online dialogue is not to be ignored. Media literacy has not increased, yet people still go to the internet for advice. Furthermore, media portrayals traditional views of womanhood and femininity. There has been little research conducted on online discourse regarding womanhood and, more specifically, motherhood and career. More women are joining the workforce and grappling with their own interpretations of motherhood and career and, as they do so, they look to online media for advice. My goal in this study was to analyze the language used by online media publications in content published regarding motherhood and career. What topics do they focus on? Which seem to recur? These questions guided this textual analysis.

I wanted to explore this topic because of my deep ties to millennial womanhood. As a 21-year-old woman myself, I have grown up a digital native and am beginning to specialize my own professional skills in digital tools and online marketing. On a large scale, this research is important relating to representations of millennial womanhood online; on a small scale, this research is important because I recognize my own susceptibility to reading these articles without understanding the trends, the language, and the intentional framing taking place underneath the advice being given. Understanding the dominant themes opens the door for exploring them even more in-depth across any variety of online media catered towards millennial women to better understand how they are being portrayed.

In the following pages, I will pictorially depict themes that emerge from the data and discuss them in more detail. In subsequent pages, I will detail my findings from within the analysis. In the last pages, I will give the implications of this data and the literature from which my research has been informed.

WORKING

language shaping
millennial womanhood

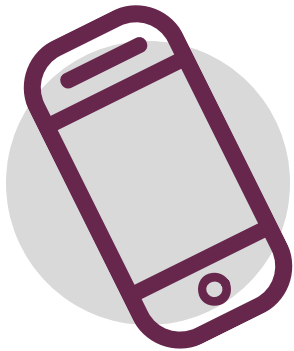
MOTHERS

on modern online
media platform Refinery29



FINDINGS

n = 45



Use of social media to share mothering stories

- From body image issues to adoption stories, platforms like Instagram and Facebook are places for recognizing mothering community
- Sharing these stories opens up vulnerable dialogue and creates opportunities for digital kinship



Celebrity as role model

- Exposure to celebrity moms has been found to be associated with competitiveness
- Celebrities have now become the new role model for working mothers
- Refinery29's interest in covering celebrity mothers is concerning in regards to reality and relatability



Earning power

- Reference to salary: written plainly in numbers and dollar signs, each figure represents much more than its numerical value
- Salary mentions quantify the work of the women mentioned, especially as they are juxtaposed with the salary of their male partners
- Creates rubric for success defining money as ultimate goal

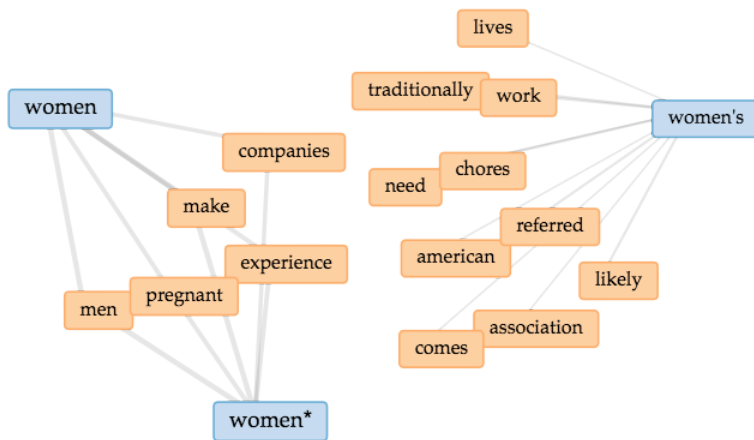


Secondary themes

- Pregnancy and birth-related advice sheds light on interest and concern with this natural process
- Mother expectations of daughter establish hopes related to body image and empowerment.
- Arguments against mom-shaming continue in building online community

VOYANT TOOLS

Voyant Tools is an open-source, web-based application for performing text analysis. These two data visualizations have been extracted from the corpus of 45 Refinery29 articles about motherhood and career.

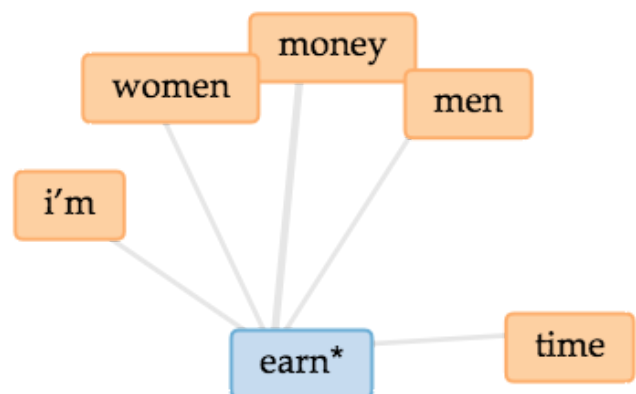


Data Visualization #1

- Uses of the word "woman" in its variations throughout the corpus and the words it is used with
- Significant connections from "women" include "men", "make", and "companies"
- Significant connections from "women's" include "traditionally", "chores", and "need"

Data Visualization #2

- Use of the word "earn" in its variations (earn, earning, etc) throughout the corpus and the words it is used with
- Related to dominant theme of **Earning Power**
- Significant connections include "women", "men", "money" and "time"



DISCUSSION

The main themes identified through my content analysis of these 45 articles were **celebrity as role model**, **use of social media to share mothering stories**, and **earning power**.

The first of the three dominant themes is the **use of social media to share mothering stories**. Refinery29 reflected this significance throughout the articles analyzed. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook were referenced several times as places for recognizing and building the mothering community; the word Instagram itself was found 16 times throughout, and the word Facebook was found eight times. The topics shared by mothers on Facebook and Instagram ranged from adoption struggles to body image pressures to breastfeeding controversies. These women were unafraid to share, even when the subject being discussed is sensitive. Sharing these stories opens up vulnerable dialogue and creates opportunities for digital kinship. Employing both the millennial desire for connection and their expertise online, young mothers are finding community in these online spaces. As a female-forward publication, Refinery29 cements the idea of social media as a space for candid conversation and shares stories about these platforms.

The second of the three dominant themes is that of **celebrities as role models**. Celebrities are portrayed as role models for not only mothers as a whole, but specifically working mothers. In the articles in which this theme was found most strongly, the female celebrities discussed their own work ethic and the balance between work and family. These articles were written to create an example of how mothers can carry out their lives, either explicitly through direct quote recommendations from the celebrity or implicitly by describing certain actions and emotions of the celebrity mentioned. Within this theme, certain aspects of celebrity life were left out, including economic stability, personal staff, and access to high-quality care giving.

The third of the three dominant themes is **earning power**. Terms like “breadwinner” were used to in narratives relating to the power and independence of women in the workplace. Specifically interesting within this topic of earning power was the referencing to salaries throughout the career-advice articles in the collection; written plainly in numbers and dollar signs, each figure represents much more than its numerical value. Salary mentions quantify the work of the women mentioned, especially as they are juxtaposed with the salary of their male partners. Many articles worked to highlight the independent, perfectionist nature of women in the workplace. The tone conveys that one can accomplish anything as long as they put the right effort in. This mentioning of salary creates a rubric for success, defining money as the ultimate goal of professional endeavors.

IMPLICATIONS

Our findings show that the binary of career and motherhood is maintained throughout our data set because, in the articles about career advice, motherhood was rarely referenced, and vice versa. This is problematic because it does not reflect the lived reality of most women who are both mothers and career women. In our data set, many articles embraced a positive, celebratory tone when discussing motherhood, but tended to emphasize working women lives as a struggle. These differences show a gap in media representation of working mothers and showcase the post-feminist concept of retreatism (Negra, 2009), which states that contentment for women is found in the home.

There is significance in social media being a platform for sharing mothering stories; millennial women are constantly retooling their online personalities, and are finding value in sharing their own experiences. This could be because of their desire for affirmation amongst peers, or to be vulnerable and share their story to help others going through similar experiences. Future research could explore these distinctions further to determine motivations that exist regarding the social media interactions of young millennial mothers.

Celebrities were a popular example of motherhood expectations in the 45 articles. Exposure to celebrities in media has been found to be associated with competitiveness amongst mothers. Refinery29's interest in covering celebrity mothers is concerning in regards to reality and relatability. Refinery29 and publications like it have a bit of work to do in terms of making clear how rare and unique these celebrity lifestyles indeed are, and shedding light on more common mothering stories. The sharing of social media messages by mothers is a step in the right direction in the pursuit of accurate representation of the average young millennial woman.

IMPLICATIONS

There also existed amongst the collection of articles a lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity; race was only mentioned in certain instances to specify that the subject was non-white, and there were no stories portraying women outside of the middle to upper-middle class range (not including the numerous celebrity portrayals, of which could be considered high-class). These were similar to the findings in messaging relating to motherhood in magazines. Moving forward, these absent subjects should be further investigated; performing qualitative coding on articles from online publications committed to more inclusive narratives could prove beneficial in order to uncover a wholly accurate representation of digital constructions of millennial motherhood.

In conclusion, our results imply that postfeminist understandings of womanhood dominate. This dominance is achieved through an emphasis on individual capacities, lack of attention to structural barriers, and by presenting all choices as equally empower while still reiterating that motherhood is the ideal.

METHOD

To answer my research question regarding the language used by Refinery29 surrounding motherhood and career, I collected articles from the online publication. The articles used were collected in two sections; the motherhood-related articles from the Mothership section of Refinery29's online content were published in the month of May 2017 and comprised 34 out of the 45 articles in my analysis. I also collected articles that were published from May through August 2017 in Refinery29's Career Advice section, which comprised 11 out of the 45 articles. I conducted qualitative coding measures to analyze the content of these 45 Refinery29 articles.

These articles (n =45) were about motherhood (n =34) and career-related advice (n =11). Data collection occurred over a period of one month in 2017. Qualitative analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Unlike quantitative content analysis, which focuses on the frequency of occurrence, qualitative textual analysis is used to explore how language and contexts work together. Information recorded for each article included the following: title, date published, a section from which it was published, and text of the article. The article texts were coded using the constant comparison method of qualitative analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). The qualitative textual analysis was supplemented with Voyant Tools analysis because it allows us to identify relationships among keywords in the data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional perception of motherhood regards women as “good mothers” if they are white, middle-class, and entirely uninterested in working outside of the home (Boris, 1994). This interpretation obviously leaves out a large majority of women, especially in today’s age when 71% of mothers are also employed (Modern Parenthood). Characteristics of this traditional motherhood have been imposed on the women reading magazines, books, and other media forms (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). These characteristics include being “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, financially expensive ideology” in which children’s needs become more important than the individual needs of their mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). These messages about working mothers are both complicated and conflicting.

Magazines have been shown to portray working moms ineffectively (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Deirdre D. Johnston and Debra H. Swanson, co-authors of several articles regarding media interpretations of mothering, discovered in their 2003 study that traditional pictures of motherhood have helped keep hidden content regarding other aspects of motherhood, specifically relating to employed mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Only 12% of mothers referenced in their examined articles were employed, and only 3% of mother-related topics involved employment (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). This study also found that at-home mothers featured in these articles were overall unhappy and confused, which is inconsistent with previous perceptions regarding how mothers “should” feel when engaging in traditional motherhood (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). For these contemporary magazines to be portraying mothers in this manner means they are “fuel[ing] dependence on magazines for expert advice”, but also damaging the psyches of at-home mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2003).

This proves especially important when considering the mothers of today. As many Millennial women (those born between 1980 and 2000) become mothers (Young & Hinesly, 2012), they are constantly reshaping their ideas about motherhood, specifically through media exposure (Chae, 2015). Millennials are described as confident and self-reliant; technologically savvy and connected; open to change and diversity; closely connected to family and social organizations; and expectant of immediate access to information (Young & Hinesly, 2012). They are utilizing motherhood-related advice like no mothers before them, thanks to this technological savvy. They are also more likely to have their habits influenced by this advice (Chae, 2015). Intensive mothering, or parenting by a mother with all effort possible (Chae, 2015), in fact increases with more media exposure to celebrity mothers, as exposure to celebrity moms is associated with competitiveness and work as role models for working mothers (Chae, 2015). The role of celebrities across much of media today is to act as role models and expectation-setters, and those expectations involve family dynamics (Chae, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the first wave of these digital natives grow older and become parents, they are bringing along with them their online savvy (Kilian et. al., 2012). While magazines have not been entirely disregarded, the internet has now become the main source for parenting information (Rothbaum et. al., 2008). Specifically, women in their 20s and 30s have been enthusiastic users of parenting websites for recommendations (Pedersen & Smithson, 2010). Within the online realm, social media platforms specifically offer a plethora of choices that empower users to create and share media in profoundly new ways (Kilian et. al., 2012).

These online platforms are quickly becoming the go-to resource for advice for young women regarding both motherhood and career (Chae, 2015). One modern platform in particular that works to craft content with both themes in mind is Refinery29, the “#1 new-media brand for smart, creative and stylish women everywhere” (Corporate at R29). Their corporate website offers a glimpse into their mission: “Refinery29 is the leading digital media company focused on women with a global audience footprint of over 500 million across all platforms. Through a variety of lifestyle stories, original video programming, and social, shareable content across all platforms, Refinery29 provides its audience with the inspiration and tools to discover and pursue a more independent, stylish, and informed life (Corporate at R29).”

Not only is Refinery29 aimed at a global audience of independent women, but it also works to make its content shareable across all platforms. Refinery29 is fulfilling the interests of young women by regularly producing articles aimed at smart, driven women in today’s digital culture (Corporate at R29). Working through this mission, Refinery29 creates a variety of content, one series of which is entitled Mothership, focused on telling stories regarding motherhood (Mothership). In contrast to motherhood-related content of media past, Refinery29 emphasizes the idea of motherhood as a choice rather than an expectation for young women, which is most explicitly reflected in the series description that closes each article within the subcategory: “Welcome to Mothership: Parenting stories you actually want to read, whether you're thinking about kids right now or not, from egg-freezing to taking home baby and beyond. Because motherhood is a big if — not when — and it's time we talked about it that way (Mothership).”

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emphasis on the series producing parenting stories “you actually want to read” insinuates that Refinery29 is attempting to resonate with young women today, who as Millennials are increasingly open-minded and moving towards self-reliance regarding motherhood (Young & Hinesly, 2012). Refinery29, according to its mission, is attempting to progress conversations regarding motherhood and career outside of the traditional definitions, working to prove itself a worthy present-day opponent to the mothering magazines of the past (Boris, 1994; Corporate at R29). This Mothership section as well as the Career Advice section within Refinery29’s library of regularly-produced content uses its own certain language to describe and tell stories about motherhood and career. The textual analysis of media is a way to uncover cultural meanings (Thomas, 1994). The use of textual analysis is employed here to understand the importance of meanings within Refinery29’s content. While there has been some commentary on the representation of motherhood in online media in general, the language used when discussing motherhood and career-related themes need more attention. Thus, my research question asks:

RQ1: What kind of language does Refinery29 use when discussing motherhood and working women?

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